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TRADITION AND CHANGE IN PETER ACKROYD'S LONDON: *A CONCISE BIOGRAPHY*

Abstract

In his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" T. S. Eliot describes tradition as accumulation and flux. Tradition is, claims Eliot, "not ... what is dead, but ... what is already living". In his thinking Eliot was much influenced by Henry Bergson's philosophy of time. According to Bergson's study "Time and Free Will", every new event throws light on and changes the past. For Bergson as for Eliot, to be living means to be constantly changing.

In his book *London: a Concise Biography* Peter Ackroyd describes the communion of present and past in the city space of London. He presents the events of London life over two millennia of its history as if they were happening on the stage of London's streets at the moment of speaking. On the other hand he meticulously builds the chronological grid into the texture of his narrative by providing accurate historical evidence. In this way, he writes London as a street spectacle against the backdrop of history. This paper aims at interpreting Ackroyd's image of the city in view of Eliot's philosophy of time and change.

Key words: London, biography, Peter Ackroyd, T. S. Eliot, time, change, tradition, Henry Bergson

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In his biography of London, Peter Ackroyd views the city as a human being. From the outset we learn that London has a body (2012: 1) and consciousness. In this vein, Ackroyd reveals the city's thoughts, manners, rituals and routines in an overwhelming narrative. As Patrick McGrath has it, "London lives, and therefore demands not a history but a biography (2001).

Ackroyd writes London's space as a living mind – it integrates history with tradition, and chronology with the pattern of activities. Accordingly, London's biography is written at the intersection of its two temporal axes – internal and external time – the time of its consciousness and the time of its history. Throughout the narrative Ackroyd works simultaneously on two levels of reality, one which offers the chronological track of events and the other where events are placed one above the other and loosely linked by certain "personality traits" which, in turn, make up the portrait of London. Before I turn to Ackroyd's text I want to introduce a few theoretical insights about time which appear to be relevant to Ackroyd's text.

T. S. Eliot's notion of tradition as described in his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919) is grounded in the concept of accumulation as much as in the idea of change. Values and works accumulate over time and create spaces, locations and subjectivities. Every new contribution to the body of accumulated traditions changes the familiar order (Eliot 1920: 42-53). In his thinking Eliot was much influenced by the philosophy of Henry Bergson. For Bergson, "to be living means to be constantly changing" (1911: 196).

For Eliot time is twofold: the time of "pure observation" and ordinary, daily time. A human being must be conscious of both, "of both what is still, and what is still moving" ("East Cooker"). In Bergson's words, moments that create a pattern are both 'in and out of time' (1944: 383). Eliot confirms Bergson's thought in his famous phrase at the end of his essay, "a poet must be conscious of what is already living" (1920. 53).

Both Eliot's and Bergson's philosophies of time are philosophies of continuity. Bergson holds that, [every new form] flows out of previous forms, while adding to them something new, and is explained by them as much as it explains them' (1944: 393). Eliot subscribes to this thinking in *The Quartets* when he says: 'approach to the meaning restores the experience/ In a different form....' ("The Dry Salvage"). This thought is actually central to Eliot's time philosophy and opens Eliot's *Four Quartets*:

Time present and time past/are both perhaps present in time future/and time future contained in time past. /If all time is eternally present/All time is unredeemable ("Burnt Norton").

Eliot's and Bergson's thoughts echo in Ackroyd's words as he writes in the Prologue to his biography of London:

London is unredeemable, too, and we may also think of [its features] as comprising a vast mass of subjective private times continually retreating into non-existence (2012: 65).

Thus, as this essay will show, Eliot's time philosophy structures Ackroyd's writing. At the beginning Ackroyd comments on the principal of narrative organization:

The biography of London [...] defies chronology. Contemporary theorists have suggested that linear time is itself a figment of the human imagination, but London has already anticipated their conclusions. There are many different forms of time in the city, and it would be foolish of me to change its character for the sake of creating a conventional narrative. That is why this book moves quixotically through time, itself forming a labyrinth (Ibid: 2)

However, Ackroyd's labyrinthine story about London does wind around historical facts. Every new age is first introduced by its official historical account. At times Ackroyd's excessive use of factuality seems odd. Official stories are reported down to the tiniest details, like:

Barely a decade after its foundation a great fire of London utterly destroyed its buildings. In AD 60 Boudicca and her tribal army laid waste the city with flame and sword, wreaking vengeance upon those who were trying to sell the women and children of the Iceni as slaves (Ibid: 20).

The historical account abruptly gives way to a different voice which, in a threatening claim, "[the fire] is the first token of the city's appetite for human lives" (Ibid: 20) indicates a pattern of London's life. Thus, Eliot's words, "[t]he knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies, For the pattern is new in every moment...." ("East Coker"), echo throughout Ackroyd's text.

"Fire" is one of the distinguishing marks of London life which forms one of its "traditions". The attention turns from time to space and from chronology to pattern since the notion of fire, besides being one of the

recurring events of London history, shapes in its metaphorical capacity the conceptual space of London life. Specifically, while the historical records of the great London fires make its history, “fire” serves as a symbol of devastation and doom and the unique ability of the city to rise anew from its ashes, ever more powerful and glorious. It also intimates another “tradition”, the colour red. “Red is London’s colour, a sign of fire and devastation” (Ackroyd 2012: 20).

Throughout the narrative the “big” history provides a stage for London’s adventures. By tracing them Ackroyd draws a pattern of the city’s daily life. This pattern is made of a set of markers like violence, noise, love of spectacle, a flavour for certain colours, attachment to darkness and a perverse weakness for crime and obscenity. These concepts structure Ackroyd’s narrative of London as they map and remap the city space.

Concepts and patterns clash and reshape these London stories, presenting the same facts in a spectrum of different perspectives. As a result, London emerges as a palimpsest, “a constant and constantly changing pattern” (Le Brun 1967: 115). In the process, events, areas, people, facts, rituals and manners are clustered around concepts like noise, theatre, costume, violence, flame, devastation, darkness, fog and many others. All of them coincide in London street life, where London concepts and features are present regardless of the age and participate in one great noisy spectacle.

The shift of the tone and voice of the narration is even more striking in descriptions such as that of “noise” as both a “tradition” and a pattern of its street life. “Noise” is, Ackroyd claims, “a token of its energy and of its power” (2012: 59).

Ackroyd tells us that, “from its earliest foundation London rang with the hammers of artisans and the cries of tradesmen. (Ibid: 59). As the city grew, [i]n the early medieval city, the clatter of manufacturing trades and crafts would have been accompanied by the sound of bells” (Ibid: 59).

“Noise” speaks of the types of London’s activities and of the degree of its liveliness, “the sound of bells, .. secular bells, church bells, convent bells, the bell of the curfew and the bell of the watchman” (Ibid: 59). In the 17th century a visitor, a German duke, was allegedly surprised “by the unique character of the city sound” (Ibid: 59). The visitor wrote: “On arriving in London we heard a great ringing of bells in almost all the churches going on very late in the evening” (Ibid: 59). The noise has taken many forms over the centuries, the noise of hammers, artisans and church bells from

London's early days merges over time with the other voices of city life, carts, shops, signs, the "ceaseless and peculiar sound", an incessant roar. A visitor in the 19th century wrote of, "the loud and everlasting rattle of the countless vehicles which ply the streets of London" (Ibid: 66). While Jane Carlyle spoke about, "an everlasting sound in my ears, of men, women, children, omnibuses, carriages, glass coaches, street coaches, wagons, carts, dog-carts, steeple bells, door-bells, gentlemen-raps, twopenny post-raps, footmen-showers-of-raps, of the whole devil to pay" (Ibid: 66). Types of London noises over time speak about the extent of its economic growth and social dynamics.

Noise, that intrinsic feature of city life seems to be connected to its other "traditions". It is an attribute of one of the most distinctive London features – the theatricality of its street life.

Ackroyd describes London's streets as a permanent stage. In the chapter "London as Theatre" we learn that many aspects of its city life are linked with some sort of spectacle: from un-festive occupations such as the trades, to real amusements such as tournaments, fairs, festivals and certainly the miracle plays of medieval times.

Show! Show! Show! Show! Show! This was the cry of a seventeenth-century city crowd, as recorded in Ned Ward's *London Spy*. There were indeed many shows to be seen on the London streets, but the greatest fair of all was held at Smithfield. It was known as Bartholomew's Fair... Historical scenes were dramatised by street performers... (Ibid: 119).

London is described as a "great stage" where, "extravagance in gesture, mien, and dress," (Ibid: 125), where the citizens are "living shapes". As "spectacle" proves to be a part of every aspect of London life, from trade and street performers to literature, it does not seem odd that all these people participate in the habit of wearing costumes.

A shopkeeper of the mid-eighteenth century would advertise the traditional worth of his wares "with his hair full-powdered, his silver knee and shoe buckles, and his hands surrounded with the nicely-plaited ruffle" (Ibid: 128).

For centuries, events that offered a number of historical and traditional readings were the London annual fairs. One of the emblems of London was certainly Bartholomew Fair. Following Wordsworth's description in the

Prelude, Ackroyd views the fair as one of the traditions which sums up many of the intrinsic features of the city's life and personal space, with its "anarchy and din Barbarian and informal", the fair was "monstrous in colour, motion, shape, sight, sound" (Ibid: 123). Bartholomew fair was an important festival which was held each year in late summer from the twelfth to the nineteenth century. Like London itself, "heterogeneous and instinctively egalitarian" the Fair was marked by "a complete erasure of ordinary social distinctions" (Ibid: 122). "The apprentice and lord might be enjoying the same entertainments, or betting at the same gaming tables." (Ibid: 122). The Fair expressed the true "egalitarian" spirit of the city where the dignitaries and ordinary citizens enjoyed the same shows of "acrobats, actors, tight-rope walkers, rope-flyer descends, and at each corner there was a wooden stage". (Ibid: 123). It revealed the taste for battle, violent games, dangerous skills, theatricality and competition: "There are dwarves, conjurers and waxworks, performing dogs and monkeys; a girl beats a drum while a mountebank sells his medicine; a pickpocket plies his trade while another kind of performer swallows fire" (Ibid: 123). There was "no distinction or subordination left, which accounts precisely for the combination of egalitarianism and theatricality that is so characteristic of London" (Ibid: 129).

Ackroyd writes Bartholomew Fair as a "moment in and out of time". On the one hand it was "a true simulacrum of London life" (Ibid: 123), on the other it prefigured later London styles: a wheel set at Bartholomew's Fair in the seventeenth century anticipated the modern wheel of the "London Eye" in the year 2000 (Ibid: 217).

Among the concepts which link a number of London's unique features from violence, to war, to plague, to transportation is "the colour red". About the "colour red" Ackroyd declares:

Red is London's colour. The cabs of the early nineteenth century were red. The pillar boxes are red. The telephone boxes were, until recently, red. The buses are characteristically still red. The Underground trains were once generally of that colour. (Ibid: 188).

In the more distant past, "The tiles of Roman London were red. The original wall of London was built from red sandstone". Red also incorporates darker features of the city: "London Bridge itself was reputed to be imbued with red, "bespattered with the blood of little children" as a part of the ancient rituals of building. Red is also the colour of violence" (Ibid)

Londoners are, in Ackroyd's story, violent in their desires, and ... carry all their passions to excess., almost in equal measures in the games, such as shooting or cockfighting, female wrestling, bear baiting, or in the public executions of criminals. Through blood, violence is also linked with the "colour red".

Beyond this, through associations with fire and blood, red also means disaster, devastations, and pestilence. It pictures London as the city which is "perpetually doomed" (Ibid: 173). Ackroyd claims, "two great titular spirits of London [are] fire and plague" (Ibid: 22). It is so described in the literature of all ages.

Within the texture of Defoe's prose London becomes a living and suffering being, not the "abstract civic space" of W.H. Auden's poem. London is itself racked with "fever" and is "all in tears." Its "face" is "strangely altered," and its streets circulate "steams and fumes" like the blood of those infected (Ibid: 177).

Notions of pestilence, plague, death and violence intimate the idea of London's dark side which is, as Ackroyd describes it, immanent to its nature. In the chapter "Crime and Punishment" Ackroyd spins the story about London crimes and prisons. Newgate Prison which existed from the twelfth until the eighteenth century was "an emblem of death and suffering" and "a true symbol of London" (Ibid: 199). Ackroyd traces the events of the several centuries long history of Newgate, "a legendary place, where the very stones were considered "deathlike," and [which] has inspired more poems, dramas and novels than any other building in London" (Ibid: 199). From its beginning it was "associated with hell" and its smell spread in the streets around it. In the fourteenth and the fifteenth century it was afflicted with the epidemic of "gaol fever" in the sixteenth, "eleven Catholic monks were left, standing and chained to pillars, to die of starvation (Ibid: 200). In the sixteenth century rumour had it that there was an underground dungeon, known as "Limbo" [...] which was "a most fearful, sad, deplorable place" (Ibid: 201). In the early seventeenth century "an anonymous drama describes it as "a prison from which it was impossible to escape" (Ibid: 201). Certainly, that presented a constant challenge to its inhabitants. A Jack Shepard at the beginning of the eighteenth century managed to escape from the Newgate several times and became largely popular "a type or symbol of those who elude the practices of oppression with effrontery and bravery as well as skill" (Ibid: 203). Shepard was a true

Londoner. His “escapes” were memorable and humorous. On one occasion he forgot a blanket in his cell, so he returned all the way down the prison chimneys and roof through the corridors until he reached his cell so as to retrieve his blanket and claim his freedom quietly again. Ackroyd inscribes other London lore in his story,

After his escapes he disguised himself as a variety of tradesmen, and generally behaved in a thoroughly dramatic fashion. To ride in a coach through Newgate was a mark of theatrical genius. He was profane to the point of being irreligious, while his violence against the propertied interests was not inconsistent with the egalitarianism of the “mob.” (Ibid: 207).

During the eighteenth century Newgate was improved and renovated several times, visited by famous writers and authorities and in the eighteenth century become a true literary symbol. Sometime in the 1830s, it was visited by a young journalist Charles Dickens and its drama recounted in *The Sketches by Boz* as “pass and repass this gloomy depository of the guilt and misery of London, in one perpetual stream of life and bustle, utterly unmindful of the throng of wretched creatures pent up within it” (Ibid: 208). Dickens again sets his characters and stories in Newgate in his second novel *Oliver Twist*. Looking at the second half of the century, Ackroyd gives an account of Newgate as “theatre”, being open to the public on certain days of the week. After the last execution in 1902, Newgate was demolished. However its story doesn’t end there since the auction of its relics renders it a symbolic nature. The paraphernalia of the execution shed sold for £5 15s 0d while each of the plaster casts of the famous criminals was “knocked down” for £5 (Ibid: 210). The auction proves again and again how the true mob of London cherish “humour and savagery in equal manners” (Ibid: 127).

The images of London scenes, objects and events are inscribed in its people, as well as produced by them. Ackroyd claims that, “It is not clear whether the whole sick body of London is an emanation of its citizens, or whether the inhabitants are an emanation or projection of the city” (Ibid: 177).

The space of London is intimately linked with its literary heritage. The famous characters, lines and authors – London dignitaries, as Ackroyd has it, sum up the concepts and traits that make up London’s portrait. The fictions that were spun round their characters “confirm the impression”

that their deeds were created by the city space itself. (Ibid: 555). This is the description of one of the most notorious of London “dignitaries”:

The scale of the sudden and brutal killings effectively marked out the area as one of incomparable violence and depravity, but it was equally significant that the crimes should have been committed in the darkness of malodorous alleys (Ibid: 555).

Another symbol of London is Sherlock Holmes who epitomizes changing identities, masks, mystery and secret lives:

Sherlock Holmes is a character who could have existed only in the heart of London as his construction epitomizes the spirit of the city. Its mystery and instability expresses the manner of Holmes who had at least five small refuges in different parts of London, in which he was able to change his personality (Ibid: 126).

Stevenson’s character, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, whose identity shifts is set in the context of the city’s “shifting insubstantial mists [...] who, could be conducted only through “the swirling wreaths” of London fog where character and identity may suddenly and dramatically be obscured” (Ibid: 126).

Ackroyd announces that “the city of crime and of unsolved mysteries is quintessentially the city of fog” (Ibid: 377). That is how Arthur Conan Doyle and Robert Louis Stevenson created their characters. Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde’s narratives are grounded in “the steamy, vaporous air” of a “dense drizzly fog” (Ibid: 377). Stevenson’s character expresses the dramatic contrast which expresses the true identity of London: There is more to it, writes Ackroyd, than the fog. In the city where evil and good live side by side “the strange destiny of Dr. Jekyll does not seem quite so incongruous” (Ibid: 377). Thus London characters appear as if they were born out of the city space. They embody London’s idiosyncratic traits, like violence, brutality and duplicity. So, in spite of their fictive nature it is difficult to separate them from the real people of London.

Ackroyd’s biography of London shows the “fullness of its time” (Bakhtin 1986: 10-59) as it is inscribed in London’s people, fictions and stones. The image of London in Ackroyd’s story appears as if it were created out of its experience, memories and actions. The city that he was born in, in which he lives and which he never leaves, is still noisy, violent, red, and theatrical and so keeps the “unredeemable moments” ever at hand.

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